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The Wildman of China:

The Search for the *Yeren*

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The Wildman of China:
The Search for the *Yeren*

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ABSTRACT

In ancient Chinese literature there are several mentions of hairy humanlike beings, and eyewitness reports of the *yeren* ("wildman") in China have persisted into the modern era. Dozens of alleged sightings of the Chinese wildman in the forests of Shennongjia (northwestern Hubei) eventually prompted a large-scale expedition of scientists to investigate the region in 1977. This article discusses three possible explanations for the Chinese Wildman. It concludes that the *yeren* is not an unidentified or elusive animal species, as some have proposed, but rather that stories about the wildman probably originated in early encounters of the Chinese with bearded European peoples. In fact traditions regarding the wildman in China can be traced back to the Qin dynasty when Chinese first encountered Greeks in the Far East and, unfamiliar with their hairier physical appearance, originated stories about a semi-human being.

Key words: Wildman, *Yeren*, Cryptozoology, Ancient Greeks

INTRODUCTION — THE CHINESE WILDMAN

In Chinese folklore there are stories of hairy humanlike beings that fall under the umbrella term “wildman” (plural “wildmen”). Oral traditions of these wildmen can be traced back over two thousand years, and the Chinese wildman is mentioned in ancient literature. These sources have usefully been

compiled by Yuan Zhenxin and Huang Wanpo (1981),[1] and modern sightings of the *yeren* have been collected by the journalist and cryptozoologist John Green (1984).[2]

Perhaps the earliest mention of a humanlike monster appears in a poem (*Jiu Ge*, 9) by Qu Yuan (340–278 BCE) that describes a *shan gui* (山鬼), a "mountain ghost" as "like a man … wearing fig leaf" (vv. 1–3). A Qing dynasty commentary on this poem (undated, but likely eighteenth-century) adds an explanatory note: "hill ghosts can generally be included as a kind of *kui*," a word that means "resembling a man."[3] It has been argued that Qu Yuan in his poem is describing a manlike creature who wears fig-leaves as clothing. This interpretation, however, is disputed by scholars who argue the monster is a demon or ogre.[4]

If Qu Yuan is discounted, the earliest source to mention wildmen is *Shan Hai Jing* (compiled between the fourth and first centuries BCE), which describes faraway "hairy people" (*maomin*).[5]

Yi Zhou Shu (fourth century BCE) and a Chinese dictionary, *Erya* (third century BCE), take note of a manlike hairy creature named *feifei* (狒狒, usually translated as "baboon"). The latter says, "*feifei* resembles man; it has long hair hanging down its back, runs quickly and devours people."[6] Another type of wildman mentioned in *Erya* is *xingxing* (猩猩, usually translated as "orangutan"). A second-century CE annotated edition of *Huainanzi* (139 BCE) by Gao Yu describes *xingxing* as having a human face but the "body of a beast."[7] The number of literary sources that referred to the wildman increased during the

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1 Yuan Zhenxin and Huang Wanpo, "A Challenge to Science: The Mystery of the Wildman," in *Wildman: China's Yeti*, ed. S. Moore. Fortean Times Occasional Papers no. 1 (London, 1981), 5–15.

2 John Green, "The Search in China for Unknown Hominoids," in *The Sasquatch and Other Unknown Hominoids*, ed. V. Markotic (Calgary: Western Publishers, 1984), 88–93.

3 *Shuowen Jiezi* (121 CE), an ancient Chinese dictionary, defines *kui* as "she-monkey, resembling a man."

4 Steven Moore, "A Brief History of Chinese Hill Monsters," in *Wildman: China's Yeti*, ed. Steven Moore, Fortean Times Occasional Papers no. 1 (London, 1981), 21; see also Arthur Waley, *The Nine Songs* (Allen and Unwin, 1955).

5 Richard E. Strassberg, *A Chinese Bestiary: Strange Creatures from the Guideways though Mountains and Seas*, ed. and transl. with a commentary (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 184–185, 220.

6 Robert H. van Gulik, *The Gibbon in China: An Essay in Chinese Animal Lore* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967), 27.

7 Van Gulik, *The Gibbon in China*, 26–27; see also S. Moore, "A Brief History," 22, for descriptions of the *xingxing*.

Tang dynasty era (618–907 CE), e.g., Li Yanshou in *Nan Shi* (History of the Southern Kingdoms, c. 650) wrote about a group of *maoren* ("hairy men"), who climbed a city wall.[8] Duan Chengshi in his *Youyang Zazu* (a miscellany on legends, 853 CE), describes the *feifei* as follows:

> If you drink the blood of the *feifei*, you will be able to see ghosts. It is so strong that it can shoulder one thousand catties … its upper lip always covers its head. Its shape is like that of an ape. It uses human speech, but it sounds like a bird. It can foretell life and death. Its blood can dye things dark purple, and its hair can be used to make wigs. Legend has it that its heels face backwards … hunters say that it has no knees.[9]

YEREN

The wildman has long been reported as dwelling in the forests and mountains of Shennongjia (northwestern Hubei), where it is called a *yeren* (also spelled *yeran* 野人, lit., "wildman"). Sightings of the *yeren* in these forests date back to the sixteenth century: *Fangxianzhi,* a local gazette of Fangxian, first mentioned the *yeren* in 1555.[10] During the Qing dynasty (1644–1912), *Fangxianzhi* published an article that said a group of *yeren* inhabited caves in the mountains of Fangxian (about 90 km north of Shennongjia); these mysterious wildmen were said to have eaten domestic chickens and dogs.[11] Zhou Guoxing (1982) points out that tales of hairy monsters from Shennongjia and Fangxian date back to earliest recorded history. He also notes an interesting archaeological discovery: "A lantern on which

8 Zhenxin and Wanpo, "A Challenge to Science," 13; Li Yanshou was a compiler of Tang court historical records.

9 *Youyang Zazu*, entry 671; translation by Carrie Reed, in *A Tang Miscellany* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 122.

10 Frank Dikötter, "Hairy Barbarians, Furry Primates and Wild Men: Medical Science and Cultural Representations of Hair in China," in *Hair: Its Power and Meaning in Asian Cultures*, ed. B. D. Miller and A. Hiltebeitel (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 52.

11 Zhenxin and Wanpo, "A Challenge to Science," 11.

there is an ornament of a *maoren* figure was unearthed in this area during an archeological excavation. It has been dated at 2,000 years."[12]

The number of eyewitness reports of the *yeren* in Shennongjia increased during the late twentieth century, prompting scientists to start investigating the phenomenon. A notable sighting in 1976 involved six members of the Shennongjia forest committee, who claimed to have spotted a hairy creature and nearly run it over while driving back from a meeting.[13] In 1980, a villager collecting herbs on the edge of the forest said she saw a *yeren*, "about seven feet tall, with reddish fur and long swinging arms."[14] In 2007, tourists in Shennongjia claimed to have spotted two wildmen behind shrubbery.[15]

Figure 1. Chinese drawing of the *yeren*, dated 1986.[16]

While eyewitness reports vary about the size of the *yeren* (many say over six feet), they tend to agree on certain other physical descriptions: red or tawny hair, abundant hairiness of body including

12 Zhou Guoxing, "The Status of the Wildman Research in China," *Cryptozoology* 1 (1982), 14.

13 Zhenxin and Wanpo, "A Challenge to Science," 8; Green "The Search in China," 90.

14 Green, "The Search in China," 91.

15 Zan Jifang, "Hubei Bigfoot—Fact or Fiction?," *Beijing Review* no. 51 (December 20, 2007).

16 Dikötter, "Hairy Barbarians," 69.

long scalp hair, bipedal motion, and resembling both modern man and ape in terms of its facial features (see Fig. 1).[17] In 1984, it was estimated that there had been approximately three hundred sightings of the *yeren*.[18] The number of recorded sightings had increased by 2018 to over four hundred.[19]

The Chinese Academy of Sciences funded an expedition to Shennongjia in 1977 to investigate and interview eyewitnesses. Co-led by Zhou Guoxing, an anthropologist from Beijing's Museum of Natural History, the expedition involved members of the Chinese military, zoologists, biologists and photographers.[20] There have since then been more search parties to the same region to investigate *yeren* sightings,[21] but none have ever been successful in recovering reliable evidence. The expedition in 1977, in fact, has been described as counterproductive, because it was too large, causing disruption to wildlife and scaring away the wildmen, if any existed.[22]

In 1981, a group called the "China Wildman Research Society" was formed with the support of eminent palaeoanthropologist Jia Lanpo (Chinese Academy of Sciences); it offered a ¥5000 ($1750) reward for a dead *yeren* specimen and twice as much for a live specimen. In 1994, another organization, this one named "Strange and Rare Animals Exploration and Investigation Committee,"[23] (奇異珍稀動物探險考察專業委員會) was founded to investigate *yeren* sightings. The following year an international expedition to Guangxi, China, resulted in a documentary on the Chinese Wildman; the expedition included the US anthropologist and cryptozoologist Grover S. Krantz, who wrote about his journey:

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17 Green, "The Search in China," 92; Gregory Forth, *Images of the Wildman in Southeast Asia* (London: Routledge, rep. ed. 2008), 194–195.

18 Christopher S. Wren, "On the Trail of the 'Wild Man' of China," *The New York Times* (June 5, 1984).

19 Laurie Chen, "The Legend of China's Bigfoot," *Inkstone News* (August 27, 2018).

20 Zhou Guoxing, "Fifty Years of Tracking the Chinese Wildman," *The Relict Hominoid Inquiry* 1 (2012), 118; Jean-Paul Debenat, *The Asian Wild Man*, transl. Paul LeBlond (Surrey, Can.: Hancock House, 2014), 135; Green, "The Search in China," 93.

21 Zhou, "Fifty Years," 124; Debenat, *Asian Wild Man,* 137–138; Andrew Marshall "In Search of the Wildman," *South China Morning Post* (September 2, 1995); Malcom Moore, "New Hunt for China's Yeti," *Telegraph* (July 2, 2012).

22 Green, "The Search in China," 94; note the expedition involved 110 individuals in total.

23 Sigrid Schmalzer, *The People's Peking Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 230.

> During late May and early June of 1995 the author spent 17 days in the People's Republic of China with Japan Television Workshop making a documentary on the Yeren or Wildman. One of our projects while there was participating in an expedition to Yuan Bau Mountain, in the Kwangsi Chuang Autonomous Region of southern China, to interview two natives of the Miao nationality who had claimed recent Yeren sightings. This was an international expedition composed of about ten Chinese, three scientists from Taiwan, a five-member Japanese TV crew, and myself, an American anthropologist... The primary objective was the Yeren story, though the scientists from Taiwan were there to study the flora, fauna, and human use of the region.[24]

THREE HYPOTHESES

There are three main hypotheses that attempt to explain the Chinese wildman, including sightings of the *yeren* in or near Shennongjia.[25] Of these, the first two are discussed by Shackley[26] (1986) and Krantz[27] (1992).

1. Unknown species hypothesis (elusive animals)
2. Known species hypothesis (misidentified animals)
3. Hairy European hypothesis (bearded men)

1. UNKNOWN SPECIES HYPOTHESIS (ELUSIVE ANIMALS)

The first hypothesis controversially argues that the Chinese wildman (including *yeren*) is either an

24 Grover Krantz, "The 1997 Yeren Investigation in China," *Cryptozoology* no. 13 (1998), 88.

25 An alternative hypothesis is that Chinese wildmen are humans with congenital hypertrichosis; see Dikötter, "Hairy Barbarians," 64–65. However, this idea cannot explain many, if any, *yeren* sightings because this genetic disorder is extremely rare (there have been fewer than fifty documented cases world-wide).

26 Myra Shackley, *Still Living? Yeti, Sasquatch and the Neanderthal Enigma* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1986), 87–88.

27 Grover Krantz, *Big Footprints* (Boulder: Johnson Books, 1992), 205–206.

unknown species of orangutan, or a relict population of *Gigantopithecus.*[28] Southern China and northern Vietnam throughout the Middle Pleistocene were inhabited by species of orangutans and *Gigantopithecus blacki*. These are thought to have gone extinct over a hundred thousand years ago. Cryptozoologists have speculated that orangutans and *Gigantopithecus blacki* could have survived to a much more recent time in China's remote forests and mountains, in isolated pockets with small breeding populations; these, it is argued, are the source of *yeren* sightings. This is a minority view, however, because almost no scientist who accepts this as a possibility considers the probability to be high: "There is always a possibility that the Wildman exists but one should not hold one's breath."[29] Cryptozoologist Richard Greenwell has estimated that the probability of the *yeren* being an unknown orangutan or a relict *Gigantopithecus* is 30 percent, but in another study published in the 1980s with the anthropologist Frank E. Poirier, he increased this estimated probability to 50 percent.[30] Poirier, however, now seems to lean more towards the view that the *yeren* is a misidentified known animal such as a snub-nosed monkey.[31]

The unknown animal hypothesis is outright rejected by most scientists, who point out the total lack of fossil evidence, as well as the unlikelihood of an unknown species eluding discovery during a time of deforestation and tourism in the Shennongjia forests (which cover 3,000 square km).[32] Zhou Guoxing, who was part of the 1977 expedition to investigate the Chinese wildman, notes, "no direct proof of the existence of the Wildman was found."[33] Furthermore, he cautions that the wildmen "simply

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28 Zhenxin and Wanpo, "A Challenge to Science," 13–14; Zhou, "Fifty Years," 22–23; Shackley, *Still Living?,* 88–90; Richard Greenwell and Frank E. Poirier, "Is There a Large, Unknown Primate in China? The *Chinese* Yeren or *Wildman*," *Cryptozoology* no. 11 (1992), 78–79; Krantz, "The 1997 Yeren Investigation," 92-93; Forth, *Images of the Wildman*, 197; Debenat, *Asian Wild Man,* 132–133; Dimitri Bayanov, "On the Trail of the Yeren," *Asia and Africa Today* no. 2 (1985), 63.

29 Frank E. Poirier, *Hu* Hongxing, and Chung-Min *Chen*, "The Evidence for Wildman in Hubei Province, People's Republic of China," *Cryptozoology* no. 2 (1983), 39.

30 Forth, *Images of the Wildman,* 305; Richard Greenwell and Frank E. Poirier "Further Investigations into the Reported Yeren: The Wildman of China," *Cryptozoology* no. 8 (1989), 55–56.

31 Tara Macisaac, "Wildman, China's Version of Bigfoot," *The Epoch Times* (June 17, 2015).

32 Joe Nickell, "Chinese Ape-Men: In Science and Myth," *Skeptical Briefs* 21(4)(2012), 4–6.

33 Zhou, "Fifty Years," 118; see also Daniel Loxton and Donald R. Prothero, *Abominable Science: Origins of the Yeti, Nessie and*

may not exist."[34] The failure to find a specimen of a *yeren*, despite rewards offered as well as numerous expeditions since the 1970s, has resulted in the increasing skepticism of Zhou Guoxing, who was originally supportive of the unknown animal hypothesis. In 2012, he argued that the *yeren* has a mere five percent chance of being an unknown orangutan species or a relict *Gigantopithecus*.[35] However, skepticism has not deterred hardcore proponents of the unknown animal hypothesis, who continue to search for the *yeren*, possibly in vain.[36] Jeff Meldrum is one of the few remaining anthropologists to continue to hunt the Chinese wildman; he controversially argues that there is footprint evidence, unless the footprints are a hoax.[37]

2. Known Species Hypothesis (Misidentified Animals)

The second hypothesis rationally, albeit mundanely, argues that the wildman is a known animal species that is misidentified.[38] Eyewitness accounts of the *yeren* are often inattentive to detail or inaccurate, because sightings have not been from a close distance, or there was not a clear line of sight.[39] Zhou Guoxing notes that monkeys and bears "quite closely resemble humans when they are standing upright

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other Famous Cryptids (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 102–103.

34 Zhou, "Fifty Years," 128.

35 Zhou, "Fifty Years," 128, see also Debenat, *Asian Wild Man*, 142.

36 Laurie Chen, "Dreamers, Crackpots or Realists? The Diehards on the Trail of China's 'Bigfoot'," *South China Morning Post* (August 26, 2018); Huang Jingjing, "62-year-old still hopes to finding the legendary wildman," *Global Times* (September 17, 2016); the latter article is about Zhang Jinxing, who has spent decades searching for the *yeren*.

37 Jeff Meldrum and Zhou Guoxing, "Footprint Evidence of the Chinese Yeren," *The Relict Hominoid Inquiry* vol. 1 (2012), 57–58, 59, "The possibility remains that the footprint casts attributed to the *yeren* were fabricated."."

38 Forth, *Images of the Wildman*), 196–197; Nickell, "Chinese Ape-Men," 5–6; Linda Jaivin, "Is There a Wildman?" *Asiaweek* (May 24, 1985).

39 For example one of the sightings recorded by Green ("The Search in China," 90), on June 19, 1976, was from a distance of 20-feet in a wooded area; another sighting on July 21, 1977 was from about 12-feet, but with an obstacle (a ditch) in the way between the eyewitness and alleged *yeren*. The 2007 sighting by tourists in Shennongjia was from a long distance of 164-feet (50 meters) with an obstacle (a shrubbery) somewhat obstructing their view; they probably had spotted bears.

and seen from afar."[40] Other reasons that eyewitnesses can easily be mistaken or confused about what they see, include myopia (near-sightedness)—which has a high prevalence in the Han Chinese population—optical illusions, or lapses in memory. The latter has been demonstrated for some reported sightings; for example, one eyewitness changed an account from sighting an unknown hairy figure to having observed a bear, based on memory recollection.[41] In 1962, sightings of wildmen in Yunnan province were investigated by Wu Xinzhi, who concluded that the locals had observed gibbons.[42]

It might be asked how eyewitnesses could misidentify a known animal species at close distance (a few reported sightings of *yeren* are within ten feet[43]). There are three snub-nosed monkey species in China that face habitat loss and so are dwindling in population size; while these animals are known to scientists and conservationists, many Chinese are unfamiliar with them. Frank E. Poirier notes, "It would be a rare sight, since these monkeys are so few in number."[44]

Purported physical evidence of the wildman (such as footprints, faecal and hair samples) have often turned out to be from bears, pandas, macaques or other known animals, including boars. Hence, "not a single real wildman hair has been collected to date."[45] Zhou Guoxing has examined hundreds of footprints said to have been left by the *yeren*; he has determined that most are overlapping bear tracks.[46] Others are either hoaxes to try to increase tourism or remain unidentified (one should not jump to conclusions regarding the latter). He claims a number of footprint casts from 1977 have become misshapen or distorted in size, poorly resembling their originals—meaning they are unreliable. His

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40 Zhou, "Fifty Years," 128.

41 Zhou, "Fifty Years," 125–126.

42 Zhenxin and Wanpo, "A Challenge to Science," 7; Green, "The Search in China," 93.

43 Green, "The Search in China," 90–91; Zhenxin and Wanpo, "A Challenge to Science," 11.

44 Macisaac, "Wildman"; the golden snub-nosed monkey (*Rhinopithecus roxellana*) is an endangered species.

45 Zhou, "Fifty Years," 119; see Krantz, *Big Footprints*, 207–208, for samples undeterminable because of contamination.

46 Zhou, "Fifty Years," 122; overlapping bear tracks also explain many sasquatch footprints in North America. As mentioned by Krantz, *Big Footprints*, 30, "A bear will walk with its hind foot striking just behind, and often overlapping with, the spot where the front foot had been placed. This can result in … as though they had been made by a bipedal creature."

argument is that mistakes were made by the Chinese investigators who made these footprint casts during the first expedition to Shennongjia:

> At the time of the 1977 large-scale investigation in Shennongjia, some investigators made castings that turned out markedly different from the original footprints that had been examined on site. That is to say, the footprint casts were unreliable, having apparently been artificially altered during the process of production.[47]

The known animal hypothesis certainly has its strengths, but it also has a major weakness. There is a discrepancy between the accounts in literary sources and artwork going back centuries that describe or depict *yeren* (and *feifei*, *maoren*) as more resembling a human, rather than like any other species.[48] The *xingxing* is shown in artwork as carrying a sword.[49] *Feifei* is described as resembling humans despite oddities such as long lips and the absence of knees.[50] In Chinese artwork in the early seventeenth century, *xingxing* look humanlike (see Fig. 2), while *maoren* are described as human in their behavior.[51] The *maomin* in the *Shan Hai Jing*[52] are called hairy people and are undoubtedly human. The tendency of modern Chinese scholars to identify *xingxing* with the orangutan and *feifei* with the baboon are therefore questionable identifications.

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47 Zhou, "Fifty Years," 122.

48 Van Gulik, *The Gibbon in China*, 29, notes, "the oldest pictures [of *feifei*, *xingxing*] preserved … human features prevail over the simian."

49 Bayanov, "On the Trail," 62.

50 Van Gulik, *The Gibbon in China*, 27; S. Moore, "A Brief History," 19.

51 Li Yanshou's description of *maoren* in *Nan Shi* reads, "hairy men clambered over a city wall, while crying out and hurling stones." The poet Yuan Mei in his *Xin Qi Xie* (published in 1781) described *maoren* as "monkeylike," but not actual monkeys, presumably because of their human characteristics; see Zhenxin and Wanpo, "A Challenge to Science," 13.

52 Strassberg, *A Chinese Bestiary,* 184–185, 220.

Figure 2. Drawing of a *xingxing* from the *Sancai Tuhui*. Published 1609[53]

3. Hairy European Hypothesis (Bearded Men)

The third hypothesis argues that the wildman has its origin in ancient encounters of Chinese with western foreigners such as Europeans, who are on average much more hairy; even today rural villagers across China tend to be unfamiliar with heavy beards, thick body hair and light-colored scalp hair. The anthropologist Frank E. Poirier, for example, when he was investigating the *yeren* in China was described by local children as none other than a *yeren* himself, because of his beard:

> Frank E. Poirier, only a normally hairy westerner who is about five feet eleven inches tall, frightened some local children, who "ran away horrified at their encounter with what they screamed to others was the Wildman in their midst."[54]

53 Published in 1609; *xingxing* are depicted as human with long hair on their backs, and the adult has a beard.

54 Nickell, "Chinese Ape-Men," 6 (quoting Poirer et al. 1983, 37–38).

Krantz[55] (1992) briefly mentions the hairy European (or bearded man) hypothesis for the wildmen: "they were actually bearded European men, a story that gained acceptance especially after it had passed through a few individuals who had never seen one of these hairy-faced giants." Grover Krantz (who died in 2002) himself was over six feet tall, with a long beard. Villagers teased him about being a wildman when he visited Guangxi in 1995.[56]

These examples of modern Chinese mistaking or being reminded of the wildman when seeing modern Europeans suggests we look again at the history of Chinese sightings of Europeans.

EARLY CONTACTS OF CHINESE AND EUROPEANS

In 329 BCE, Alexander the Great built Alexandria Eschate ("farthest Alexandria"), a walled city in Fergana (now Khujand, Tajikistan) to mark the extremity of his conquests in the far east; the city was known by ancient Chinese as Dàyuān (大宛, lit., "Great Ionians"). After the death of Alexander, Alexandria Eschate was ruled by the Seleucid dynasty and in the late third century BCE became part of the Greco-Bactrian Kingdom. According to Apollodorus of Artemita,[57] the Greco-Bactrians "extended their empire even as far as the Seres and the Phryni." In other words, their territory bordered on the Tarim Basin (Xinjiang, China).

Archaeology indicates that the Greeks here established their first direct contact with Chinese of the Qin dynasty (226–206 BCE).[58] Zhang Qian, a Chinese diplomat, traveled to Dàyuān c. 130 BCE. In 102 BCE the inhabitants of Dàyuān were defeated by the Han dynasty, but the *Historiae Alexandri Magni* claims the city managed to retain its Hellenic culture into the first century CE.[59]

The earliest encounter of the Chinese with Greeks aroused much curiosity among the former

55 Krantz, *Big Footprints*, 206.

56 Krantz, "The 1997 Yeren Investigation," 89.

57 Apoll. Art. *ap*. Strab. 11. 1. 1; Apollodorus of Artemita (c. 100 BCE) was a Greek historian.

58 Lucas Christopoulos, "Hellenes and Romans in Ancient China," *Sino-Platonic Papers* no. 230 (2012), 14.

59 Curt. 7. 6. 27; Michael Wood, *In the Footsteps of Alexander the Great* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), 158, says: "Curtius claims (although how he knows this is unclear) that in his day (AD 30s) the descendants of these people still retained their identity as a group because of their memory of Alexander."

because they were unfamiliar with the Greeks' physical appearance. The ancient Chinese history *Shiji* (c. 90 BCE) details Zhang Qian's journey to Dàyuān and describes the male inhabitants as having "deep-set eyes and profuse beards."[60] Dàyuān, alongside Dàxià (Bactria) and other western lands in ancient Chinese geography, were collectively known as the Xīyù (西域), "Western Regions." The inhabitants of the Xīyù were described by a seventh-century commentator[61] on the *Hanshu* (111 CE) as red- or tawny-haired and blue-eyed. It is likely the Tang dynasty commentator had in mind descendants of Greeks rather than of Iranic peoples.[62]

Chinese have long perceived the lighter-colored hair and heavier beards of European peoples to be unusual features; when Chinese first encountered Dutch traders during the seventeenth century, they called them *hongmao fan* (紅毛番), "red-haired barbarians." A Chinese record dated 1601 (describing a sighting of the Dutch) notes, "locals did not know where they were from and called them red-haired devils."[63] Similarly, when Chinese first met European missionaries, they were startled by their red or tawny beards and light eye color, as described by Dikötter (1998):

> Chinese were struck by the hairy appearance of Europeans, and the bearded missionaries seem to have made a durable impression during the seventeenth century. Giulio Aleni, for instance, was described as a "man with blue eyes and the beard of a dragon" during his first visit to Fujian province between 1625 and 1639. The Dutch were commonly referred to as "red-haired barbarians' … the Portuguese were described as "seven feet tall, eyes like a cat, a mouth like an oriole, an ash-white face, thick and curly beards like black gauze and almost red hair" … the diary of Lin Zexu (1785–1850), the

60 Burton Watson, *Records of the Grand Historian of China. Volume II. Translated from the Shiji of Sima Qian* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), 279–280.

61 Yan Shigu, commentary on *Hanshu*, vol. 96 (Traditions of the Western Regions).

62 Xu Wenkan, "The Discovery of the Xinjiang Mummies," *J. Indo. Eur. Stud.* 23, nos. 3/4 (1995): 361.

63 Zhaorong Peng, "The Image of the Red-Haired Barbarian in Chinese Official and Popular Discourse," in *Images of Westerners in Chinese and Japanese Literature*, ed. H. Meng and S. Hirakawa (Amsterdam, 2000), 19–20.

> imperial commissioner appointed to suppress the opium trade [says]: "They have heavy beards … they do really look like devils."[64]

This appears to be the most parsimonious explanation for the wildmen of Chinese folklore,[65] and it perhaps helps explain a few modern sightings of the *yeren*, those that aren't misidentified bears or monkeys. Literature reveals that the Chinese have long been fascinated by the hairier and fairer appearance of Europeans. Arguably the origin of the wildman in China (over two thousand years ago) began with the earliest encounter of Chinese with Greeks, who were unfamiliar-looking but intriguing to them by reason of their beards and tawny hair, which led to an exaggerated appearance of the wildman in stories. It is worth noting, too, that an analogy can be found in encounters with the Portuguese by natives on the Indonesian island of Halmahera, which similarly resulted in tales of wildmen—by them named *biri-biri* or *yawas*.[66] Traditions of the wildman may have persisted in China because of the renewed contacts China experienced with Europeans, such as Byzantine merchants encountered along the Silk Road and the Dutch who arrived by sea in early modern days.

CONCLUSION

The "hairy European hypothesis," is by far the most convincing in explaining the origin of the *yeren* in folklore, and it is supported by Chinese literature, which describes Europeans (in the eyes of the Chinese) as resembling hairy monsters and tawny-haired creatures.[67] The wildman in China is reddish-haired and

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64 Frank Dikötter, "Hairy Barbarians, Furry Primates and Wild Men: Medical Science and Cultural Representations of Hair in China," in *Hair: Its Power and Meaning in Asian Cultures*, ed. B. D. Miller and A. Hiltebeitel (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 54.

65 Strassberg, *A Chinese Bestiary,* 185, alternatively notes *maomin* could have been the hairy Ainu people of Japan.

66 Nils Bubandt, "Of Wildmen and White Men: Cryptozoology and Inappropriate/d Monsters at the Cusp of the Anthropocene," *J. R. Anthropol. Inst.* 25 (2) (2019): 223–240, "Known regionally as *biri-biri* and called *yawas* in the village of Buli … these white wildmen are easily the most primitive of all humans."

67 Frank Dikötter, *The Discourse of Race in Modern China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 10.

hirsute; these physical features of Europeans provoked curiosity among Chinese as far back as their initial contact with ancient Greeks.

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